
M A S S A C H U S E T T S

A V E N U E



Introduction

Massachusetts Avenue, in North Cambridge, is primarily a commercial corridor which contains a variety of other land uses as well. Roughly half of the properties (approximately 100) are used entirely for commercial uses while the remaining parcels are residential, mixed-use (commercial on the ground floor and residential above), institutional or vacant. Recently, two parks have been added to the mix of land uses on the Avenue. In 1981, Clarendon Park was created, and in 1984, the railroad land crossing the Avenue at Trolley Square was converted to Linear Park.

Land Use

There are approximately 130 commercial establishments on Massachusetts Avenue. Since 1980, the earliest date for which this information is available, there have been few changes in the use or market orientation of these establishments. While business ownership may have changed, only eight sites have changed their land use significantly between 1980 and 1988. The following table lists those businesses:

Address	1980	1988
815 Somerville Ave.	Porter Sq. Dodge	Porter Sq. Arcade (under construction)
1923A Mass. Ave.	Residential	Festivo
1923B Mass. Ave.	Residential	Gnomon Copy
1925 Mass. Ave.	Residential	Annie Dakota
1925 Mass. Ave.	Residential	Needle Advice
1963 Mass. Ave.	Miller & Seddon Co.	Children's Workshop
1967 Mass. Ave.	Miller & Seddon Co.	Cribs and Cradles
1975 Mass. Ave.	Miller & Seddon Co.	Bob Slate Stationer
2067 Mass. Ave.	Vacant	Henderson Carriage Offices Bank of Greece Tapas Charles Assoc. Health Stop Frameworks Window Planning
2211 Mass. Ave.	Residential	Kate's Mystery Books

Another seven businesses have maintained the same category of use, but have changed their market orientation. These establishments are listed below:

Address	1980	1988
2000 Mass. Ave.	Charette	The Dino Store
2024 Mass. Ave.	Self Defense Studio	Saturday's Child
2285 Mass. Ave.	Di Anthony School of Cosmetology	WBT Balloons Vacant Nite Tite Furniture Armed Forces Center
2150 Mass. Ave.	Allen Stationary	Supercuts
2326 Mass. Ave.	Sacred Heart Religious	Realty World Star
2362 Mass. Ave.	The Caning Shoppe	Budget Copy Center
2368 Mass. Ave.	Dudley Furniture	Living Rooms Unlimited
2372 Mass. Ave.	Dudley Furniture	Hana Sushi
2374 Mass. Ave.	Dudley Furniture	Capriccio Salon
2376 Mass. Ave.	Dudley Furniture	Korean Store
2378 Mass. Ave.	Dudley Furniture	Palmer Video
2380 Mass. Ave.	Dudley Furniture	Cambridge Studio Photographers

While many businesses along Massachusetts Avenue continue to serve the immediate neighborhood, certain areas have become more regionally focused. In Porter Square, for example, there are many more chain stores and fast food establishments than there have been in the past. In addition, one retail mall has just opened (just outside the neighborhood's boundary), and another is under construction, with shops catering to the upper-end market.

Zoning

Massachusetts Avenue has four distinct zoning districts encompassing five separate sections of the corridor. (See map on page 39.)

- From Porter Square north to Beech Street and Creighton Street is zoned Business C which has a 55 foot height limit and a 2.0 floor area ratio.
- North to Norris Street and Shea Road is a Business A-2 district which has a 45 foot height limit with a 1.0 floor area ratio for commercial uses and a 1.75 floor area ratio for housing.
- Trolley Square (from Shea Road to Washburn Avenue) is zoned as a Business C-1 district which has a 60 foot maximum height limit with a 2.75 floor area ratio for commercial uses. Residential uses are allowed a 2.5 floor area ratio and up to a 3.0 floor area ratio with a special permit.

- From Washburn Avenue to Brookford Street is another Business A-2 district.
- The remaining parcels on Massachusetts Avenue are zoned as a Residence B district which has a 35 foot height limit and a .5 floor area ratio.

The existing zoning along the Avenue is the result of a comprehensive rezoning in 1986. Prompted by a rezoning petition submitted by neighborhood residents, the Cambridge City Council in 1985 requested that a comprehensive land use and zoning study be done. The Community Development Department worked together with an advisory committee of area business owners and residents, along with the consulting firm of Wallace, Floyd and Associates, to produce an urban design and land use study of the corridor. Out of this effort came a design guidelines document and a rezoning petition which the City Council adopted as part of the zoning ordinance in October 1986.

In addition to separate zoning districts, the 1986 rezoning created the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District encompassing the entire northern portion of the corridor. The intent of the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District is to create a more harmonious and consistent image for development along the Avenue through additional regulations beyond those of the base zoning districts. The focus of the Overlay District's regulations is based on building and site design, pedestrian amenities, historic preservation, and in general, on encouraging development of appropriate scale and character. The Overlay District also provides for a formal, yet non-binding review by the Community Development Department with public review of those projects over 6,000 square feet.

The 1986 land use study and rezoning also conceived of Trolley Square as a distinct commercial node along Massachusetts Avenue. Thus, in the Business C-1 zoning district, a higher density of use is allowed, above that of base zoning, with a special permit, provided a number of criteria are

met. One criterion is that 15 percent or more of the lot be green area or other open space, as accepted by the Planning Board, which grants the special permit. Other criteria include the amount of square footage devoted to residential use; site planning for parking; and mandatory design review.

Neighborhood Survey Results

Eighty-five percent of residents think that the majority of the retail establishments located on Massachusetts Avenue are serving North Cambridge residents more than people from other Cambridge neighborhoods or adjacent communities. In addition, the majority of residents said that the quality of services has remained relatively stable during the past five years.

Study Committee Concerns

(1) **Trolley Square Zoning:** One of the strongest and most persistent concerns of the Study Committee centered around the zoning in Trolley Square. Members feel that the existing Business C-1 zoning district is inappropriate because it allows greater density here than in other areas of Massachusetts Avenue. They made the following points:

- Trolley Square should not be a development node as conceived in the 1986 Massachusetts Avenue rezoning. Members agree that Trolley Square would be redeveloped more appropriately at the level of the Business A-2 zoning district which is similar to its present scale and the majority of land along the corridor.
- An argument could be made that development in Trolley Square should be less than other areas along the Avenue, as it is halfway between two intense nodes, Porter Square and Alewife.
- The lack of parking on residential streets in Trolley Square is a serious problem.

- Committee members stressed their concern that the combined amount of development allowed by both the Business C-1 district and the adjacent Industry A-1 district is far too great.
- The community had intended that the open space criteria in the special permit would create visual and usable open space for the community. However, the criteria have not been interpreted in this way. Consequently, this requirement has not enhanced the Avenue.

(2) **Design Review:** The Committee would like to see regulations adopted which would require a more stringent review process along Massachusetts Avenue.

(3) **Historic Homes:** The Cambridge Historical Commission has identified six houses on Massachusetts Avenue (between Chester and Day, and Rindge and Haskell) which are the last remaining houses built during the period of residential development along the Avenue (1870-1910). The Committee would like to ensure that these houses are maintained and preserved.

(4) **Residential/Commercial Areas:** The interface between commercial and residential uses is a problem in many areas on and surrounding Massachusetts Avenue. Trucks serving businesses use residential streets throughout the day and night. In addition to the noise, other activities, such as early morning trash pickup, also create considerable problems for residents living close to these businesses.

(5) **Signage:** Many of the signs on Massachusetts Avenue are unattractive. Flashing signs are inappropriate in this area and overly large or protruding signs detract from the aesthetic quality of the neighborhood. Because many of these signs predate the sign ordinance, current regulations do not apply to many of the worst offenders.

Massachusetts Avenue Recommendations

(1) Examine the special permit criteria for Trolley Square to determine how they can be revised to more effectively produce amenities for the neighborhood. In particular, consider changes which would require that open space be visible, or accessible, from the Avenue.

(2) The City is currently working on the establishment of a design review process and guidelines which would require all new projects over a certain size to go through a binding review process. This concept should be supported.

(3) Work with the Historical Commission and area residents to either create an historic district or give landmark status to the appropriate houses on Massachusetts Avenue.

(4) Work with area residents and local businesses to establish reasonable delivery and trash pick-up hours.

(5) Remove all existing and disallow any new billboards on Massachusetts Avenue, to the extent permitted by state statute. Strengthen and enforce the sign ordinance. Give owners a certain amount of time to put up new signs which conform to the ordinance.

(6) Encourage landscaping, tree planting and seating areas along the Massachusetts Avenue corridor.

(7) Investigate existing programs and available funding sources to assist businesses to upgrade their properties.

Study Committee Recommendation

The Study Committee strongly recommends that Trolley Square be rezoned so that the development potential in this area is comparable to the rest of Massachusetts Avenue. In addition, they want the City to consider reducing the geographic boundaries of the existing zoning districts to eliminate the residential units on Cameron Avenue from this district.

At this time, the Community Development Department does not endorse this recommendation because Trolley Square was part of a comprehensive rezoning effort which was completed just two years ago. Given limited resources, the Department will be concentrating its efforts on other critical areas of the neighborhood and City.